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ABSTRACT

A study examined the question of how one Australian non-metropolitan community consolidates and develops sustainable economic and social activity through the learning of community members. The research used a focused interview process with open-ended questions with these 2 major sub-groups in the community and explored their interrelatedness: 2 people employed in 17 industry groups delineated for benchmarking performance in vocational education and training (VET) and 1 person affiliated with groups of community organizations. Sources of learning in these three contexts were explored: in recent paid work, in community activities, in home activities. Respondents rated the value to them of these five sources of learning: at school, through post-school qualifications, through work, outside of work from involvement with community groups, and associated with home activities. Findings indicated nonformal and informal learning contributed to a substantial proportion of an individual's learning. Formal learning through schooling and post-school qualifications were assigned a relatively lower value. While 46 percent of VET graduates regarded VET qualifications as of high or medium usefulness, trade qualifications and higher level awards were more highly valued. Regarding their most important skill, 47 percent named empathy for others and 42 percent named communication skills. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

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VALUE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN A NON-METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This study examines the question of how a non-metropolitan community consolidates and develops sustainable economic and social activity through the learning of community members. It includes an examination of the respective contributions of schooling, post-school education and training, and learning at work as well as learning at home.

Paper presented at Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association 1999 Conference, 'Quality and Diversity in VET Research', Melbourne, 11–12 February 1999.

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Introduction

This study starts from the premise that learning occurs over a lifetime in a wide range of contexts outside of formal education, including in the workplace, community and home. Its methodology is oriented to collecting evidence of learning over a lifetime. It aims firstly to determine the ways in which learning at work, in community life and at home integrate in ways not detected by formal, linear or hierarchical models of skill and knowledge acquisition. Secondly, it anticipates that learning may not be confined to any one sector, and that much valuable learning may be informal or nonformal and occurs in community and workplace settings beyond formal VET provision. Thirdly, it sets out to investigate the extent to which knowledge is valued outside the domain of specific industry, community or work sector.

In effect, the study explores the discrepancy between vocational education and training (VET) as a set of policy terms and programs and the reality of vocational learning, as experienced and valued by people in their everyday lives. This discrepancy is one significant problem in VET research in Australia (Falk 1998). VET research, like VET policy, also involves simplification of the complexity of lived experience for analytical purposes. In this study, we make out own necessary simplifications in order to approach the value of VET for a small number of workers and community members (N=55) in one Australian geographic community. What we purposefully broaden, however, is the detail about the diverse forms, sites and sources of learning, and the value of such learning in community and workplace contexts for those individuals over a lifetime.

We also broaden the notion of value, as something which includes but goes beyond the formal, accredited, vocational and economic. Our broadening is deliberate. Public policy and research in VET has frequently become stuck fast (and generalised from) remotely measured economic data, phenomena, outcomes and dimensions based around involvement in formal VET (mainly TAFE) programs by individuals, often divorced from their workplaces or communities.

A large body of recent research questions the usefulness of *only* emphasising the economic dimension (Marginson 1993; Butler and Lawrence 1996; Hyland 1996; Lawrence 1997; Anderson 1997; Falk and Kilpatrick 1998; Childs and Wagner 1998; Billett et al. 1997; Falk and Harrison 1998b). Extensive and ongoing research at the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia has focussed on other dimensions through opening the broader VET envelope of learning as it occurs in regional communities, a focus previously de-emphasised by emphases on 'capital V' VET, 'delivered' from cities through TAFE.

No previous research has measured the economic and vocational value of VET, incorporating the social, community and cultural aspects of life and learning for people over the course of a lifetime. This study investigates how each of these aspects integrates during moments of learning in both community and workplace contexts. It distinguishes between contexts of skills and knowledge acquisition and contexts of use. This distinction helps in understanding the value of all sources of learning when learning is used in any context throughout life. This

conceptualisation also assists in an understanding of policies and strategies related to 'lifelong learning'.

VET is commonly construed, described and researched using public policy terms and assumptions based around an *a priori* definition of VET 'delivery'. It is widely assumed that VET is separate and distinct from other forms of training, and particularly from education. It is widely assumed that VET can be 'wrapped', as a 'training package', sold in 'markets' or 'delivered' as a training program. Once competencies are 'achieved', the learning can be 'articulated' (like behind a vehicle), taken somewhere else and 'transferred' for credit. Learning gets put on the shelf for purchasing in a metropolitan market place. Regional VET gets explained away as a thin market or treated in welfare terms as a community service obligation.

The lived reality in rural and isolated Australia is different. Vocational learning derives from a range of sources other than public provision in TAFE (Technical and Further Education). While it is possible and necessary to lump, divide and simplify learning generally, and VET specifically, into its component parts for research purposes, it is an integral but integrated part of people's lives. In the forthcoming full report of this study (Toms et al. 1999) we demonstrate this integration, but in doing so make necessary simplifications of lived experience, and in particular of learning.

Research into 'outcomes' from, and 'value' of VET, are subject to a number of problematic limitations and assumptions, particularly in rural and isolated situations where big city, big industry versions of VET do not fit what actually occurs in terms of either customer choice or VET provision. We have found that a useful, alternative way of wrapping both outcomes and values together is by focussing on the twin notions of social capital and the learning community. Putnam's (1993, 35) definition of social capital defines it as 'features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'.

Falk and Kilpatrick (1998, 23) investigated social capital in regional community contexts as a process associated with many forms of rural learning, and defined social capital as 'the product of social interactions contributing to the social, civic or economic well-being of a community-of-common-purpose'. This definition has been used as a means of investigating VET as a social process well beyond its institutional 'packaged' and 'delivered' forms. VET, in its capital 'V', publicly funded forms is only one part of the wider, embedded process of vocational preparation and re-positioning occurring in rural and isolated community contexts.

Investigation, in the current study, of VET as an activity centred on one regional community is appropriate, timely and critical. Rural and isolated communities are currently recognised as bearing an inordinate social and economic burden as a result of National Competition Policy (NCC 1999). In its report, the National Competition Council recently conceded that '... the loss of a valued shop which provides commerce and a focal point for a small community can be a serious social cost, and could provide a case not to go ahead with a particular reform' (cited in *The Age* 8 February 1999, 4). The loss of such a traditional focus for

sustaining community learning can mean a loss of the community itself. In this sense, as Putnam (1993, 33 & 37) suggests, social capital is a precondition for economic development. Or as Moore and Brookes (1996, 7) concluded, there is a direct relationship between economic development and community development. It is at the local, rural community level where there are no alternative consumer or citizen 'choices' that theories of markets and one dimensional economic policies and systems become least relevant but most damaging.

Magnified nationally, the widespread loss of government and community services in Australia has bitten deep into the sustainability of many regional centres and into the every day social and vocational lives of its residents. Some, but not all communities vanish in this debilitating process of change. Others develop community-embedded processes to sustain social organisation: in effect they seek to sustain social capital through building and rebuilding 'networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit', as predicted by Putnam (1993, 35). Learning, through VET and otherwise, is one important mechanism for sustaining such communities.

It is important to stress that social capital is not a phenomenon restricted to regional Australia. Networks, norms and trust play a similar important role for mutual benefit within communities in suburbs and cities, in businesses, offices and factories, in urban Aboriginal and migrant communities. The difference in regional Australia is that in many cases social capital, as it is created for mutual benefit in a small community, becomes the last line of defence to community survival and sustainability. VET in its many forms is a critical component of this sustainability, given that most of its young citizens are obliged to leave to undertake education and to get work in large but remote cities.

In regional settings, VET systems delivered, designed and predicated on the development of human capital for big companies and corporations are in danger of completely missing individual needs, those of small business as well as the collective needs of a community.

Research questions

A series of hypotheses are examined in this study.

1. Social capital as generated through VET in its many formal and community-embedded forms should be observable in regional Australia.
2. Informal learning is not only significant in the workplace (Sefton 1998, 4), but is also a factor enhancing the development and use of social capital in regional communities (Falk and Kilpatrick 1998, 16-17).
3. There is a requirement of communities, particularly non-metropolitan communities, to become learning communities (Bruce 1998, 47) to facilitate individual and societal change (OECD 1996).
4. Lifelong learning is likely to originate from a variety of sources and to 'contribute to an array of goals rather than to a single aim' (OECD 1996, 87).

The research questions emerged from a literature review which indicated a paucity of data in the literature on the value of VET. Where data does exist, it is generally couched in terms of quantifying benefits of different modes of delivery, completion rates, and qualifications gained rather than on perceptions of wider value.

The broad question posed to approach a resolution of the six claims above was "How does learning and training contribute to consolidating and developing sustainable social and economic activity in a non-metropolitan community?"

Two sub-questions were posed. The first was "What are the respective contributions of schooling, post-school education and training, learning at work and learning outside of work to sustainable social and economic activity? The second was "What are the possible frameworks for valuing the respective contributions of post-school education and training, learning at work and learning outside of work in a non-metropolitan community?"

In essence, this study attempts to answer the question posed by Law and Greenwood (1977, 95), when they asked

> Cannot vocational education perform a larger, more important, inherently better function than it presently does and at the same time lose none of its present effectiveness?

Method

The current study was based in one non-metropolitan geographic area in Australia, using data from 55 audio-recorded interviews, together with survey data (in graphical form) completed by respondents, selected as being representative of both community and recognised industry groupings. It seeks to document how the respondents perceive the relative contributions of past learning to their present activities. That is, it asks "How is VET is valued in these people's lives?"

Interviews were conducted by two interviewers, combining a focussed interview process with open ended questions relating to the research questions with standard prompts. Data were primarily analysed using detailed manual thematic analysis supported by QSR NU*DIST and standard statistical collation and procedures. The approach employed was inclusive of informal learning as well as formal learning in a variety of contexts over a lifetime. In effect, it involved measurement and documentation of indicators and sources of social capital generation, as one way of recognising the importance of learning in one community in regional Australia.

The research used 'community' in the sense of a physical location that has established boundaries. The community chosen, with a population of around 25,000 people, is one of 78 Australian centres with populations between 10,000 and 30,000 people (ABS 1996 Census). The site was chosen because of its non-reliance on any one industry sector, a demographic spread of population by gender and age and an ongoing presence of VET. The community has long been served by TAFE and adult and community education (ACE) providers and more recently private providers.

The sampling was purposeful in that the 55 participants were selected for inclusion based on the possibility that each participant would increase the variability of the sample. The sampling strategy aimed to include two major sub-groups within the community and to explore their inter-relatedness. The first targeted sub-group aimed to include two people who were employed in the seventeen industry groupings delineated by ANTA for benchmarking performance in VET (ANTA 1997, 7). The second included one person affiliated with groupings of community organisations derived from broad areas of interest.

As part of the interview process, an exploration was undertaken of the sources of learning in three contexts: in recent paid work, in community activities and in home activities. Respondents were asked to construct three pie graphs within given circles for each context. Within each circle, respondents allocated what they perceived at that time to be the relative value to them personally of five sources of learning. They were learning:

- at school
- through post-school qualifications
- through work
- outside of work from involvement with community groups
- associated with home activities.

About the interview sample

Tables 1 and 2 summarise gender, age and labour force status of respondents. The sample was biased towards older, working males. The sample comprised around one third (36 per cent) females. Around three quarters (76 per cent) of all interviewees were aged over 40. While one half of the women interviewed were not seeking work, nine out of ten males (91 per cent) were in paid employment or self employed.

Table 1: Gender and age of interviewees by gender

Age group	Female	Male	Totals
Under 39	6	7	13
40-49	3	15	18
Over 50	11	13	24
Totals	20	35	55

Table 2: Labour force status of interviewees by gender

Current labour market status #	Female	Male	Totals
Paid employment	10	21	31
Self employed		11	11
Unemployed		2	2
Full time student		1	1
Not seeking work	10	3	13
Totals	20	35	55

Note: # some categories overlap

While the sampling technique focussed on two people employed in each of 17 industry types, it became clear that such a categorisation had changed over time. Only one third (36 per cent) of employed respondents had remained in their current (ANTA 1997 defined) employment sector for the term of their employment to date. In effect most people had worked in two or more employment sectors.

Similarly, while community respondents were chosen on the basis of one current community membership, all but one of the 55 respondents was involved formally with community activities of some sort. Around half of respondents were in sporting groups and around one quarter were in service clubs or self help support groups. More than ten per cent of respondents belonged to each of one of six other community group types. Indeed only 12 of the 54 respondents were current members of one group only.

Limitations

This study is concerned with people's perceptions of the value of VET in their lives. It does not claim to establish the categorical composition of forms of learning to present activities in any sense, apart from those of respondents considered strictly as proportional contributions.

Results

Table 3 summarises mean values ascribed by interviewees to sources of learning by learning context.

Table 3: Mean values (%) ascribed by interviewees to sources of learning by learning context

SOURCES OF LEARNING	VALUE TO PAID WORK	VALUE TO COMMUNITY activities	VALUE TO HOME activities
	%	%	%
At work	38	27	20
In the community	17	28	24
In the home	15	17	29
Post-school study	17	15	11
Schooling	13	13	16
Totals	100	100	100

While the table indicates the complexity of the nature of learning, it highlights that non-formal and informal learning (particularly in the workplace, home and the community) contributes to a substantial proportion of an individual's learning. Conversely, formal learning through schooling and post-school qualifications were ascribed relatively a lower value.

Domains of learning

The post-school learning identified by participants was categorised into three main domains:

1. **formal learning**: post-school accredited VET or university
2. **nonformal learning**: structured learning on or off the job
3. **informal learning**: defined as 'incidental transmission of attitudes, knowledge and skills' (Coletta 1996, 22).

Formal learning

Interviewees with formal learning (n=49) were asked why they had undertaken formal learning in five overlapping categories. While around one half (49 per cent) had undertaken such learning to obtain employment, much other study was also undertaken for essentially recurrent, professional reasons: to change employment (14 per cent), for career advancement (22 per cent), job security (24 per cent) and personal challenge (22 per cent). One interesting finding consistent with concerns raised by Billett (1998, 8) is that many interviewees (45 per cent) had at some point undertaken modules or subjects from courses rather than entire courses. This reflected specific needs at that time rather than the need for a completed qualification.

Nonformal learning

Nonformal learning in Coletta's (1996, 23) view is learning that 'adjusts itself to accord with the changing demands of the life-cycle and environment', wherever and whenever those needs arise. In some cases these needs were found to arise in

a workplace such as activities sponsored by employers on or off the job. Other nonformal learning was associated with learning about particular products or services and learning through community sponsored activities or non-accredited adult and community education classes.

Informal learning

Informal learning is distinguished from nonformal learning in Coletta's (1996, 22) typology as the 'incidental transmission of attitudes, knowledge and skills'. The corresponding learning which emerged from the data included learning through trial and error, mentoring, personal challenge (motivation) observation, experience over time, shadowing or doubling and responsibilities not associated with work or formal study. Much of that informal learning occurred through 'real world', 'on the shop floor', 'out there' learning, primarily through what interviewees described as 'trial and error'. It also included personal reading other than for formal study.

Value of VET for life: Some VET graduate views

While most VET graduates regarded VET qualifications as of high (46 per cent) or medium (32 per cent) usefulness, trade qualifications and higher level awards were more highly valued. What was particularly revealing was what interviewees regarded as their most important skill. While there were multiple mentions in the transcript data, two skills stood out: empathy for others (47 per cent) and communication skills (42 per cent).

Empathy was the most mentioned personal trait, and was commonly referred to as 'people skills'. It differed from communication skills, also highly cited, in that it indicated a relationship, a receptiveness or relatedness that allowed respondents to 'get along with' or 'work with others'. In many senses, empathy paralleled the key competency 'Working with others and in teams'.

The next most mentioned skills were empathy for employment tasks (18 per cent) responsibility for the job (15 per cent), problems solving and initiative (15 per cent), technical skills (13 per cent) and motivation (12 per cent). In effect, the most highly regarded skills were primarily non-technical. Many (eg empathy, motivation, adaptability) are difficult to formally acquire or objectively measure as competencies. A sub-set of most highly regarded skills include several of the key competencies (communication and problem solving skills).

Discussion and findings

What is particularly striking from this comprehensive micro-study in one community is that while formal learning, including VET learning, has been important and valued for its role in getting 'an education' and a 'job', the most highly valued subsequent learning is non-credentialled, nonformal and informal. Further, much of that learning is community or work based.

This finding has important contra-indications to the line of thinking associated with the value of lifelong learning based solely around notions of the 'individual ' making a 'personal commitment' at 'personal expense'. Lifelong learning theory

has to account for models which recognise that important and valued learning occurs well beyond self-serving individuals in an education market. Learning has value to others beyond the individual, and beyond the workplace. The value of VET and workplace learning also extends beyond the workplace.

This study reinforces the important role of the community as well as the workplace in facilitating and encouraging valued learning. Community activity and paid work generate nonformal and informal learning. This learning has valuable social and vocational value and currency. The value and currency of workplace and community learning, although not endorsed via a qualification system, has important social, community and economic associations, dimensions and values.

Community activity, unlike most paid work, is a voluntary social process occurring in a supportive environment, and is particularly conducive to learning. The difference between informal, nonformal and formal learning is that learning occurs through social processes of a community and in the workplace rather than as a pre-determined program outcome. The outcomes of informal and nonformal learning are flexible, they are determined by particular situations and participants. Whilst there is value in having certain, known learning outcomes, there is also a place for learning which is adaptable and produces customised and contextualised outcomes.

Conclusion and implications

In summary, we conclude that

1. Work, community life, home learning and knowledge and skills use integrate in ways not detected by linear or hierarchical models of skill and knowledge acquisition.
2. While learning is not confined to any one sector, much valuable learning is informal or nonformal and occurs in community and workplace settings.
3. Knowledge is not (and does not remain) within the domain of any specific industry, work or community sector.

Our study indicates that: for those in recently in work, the highest value is placed on workplace learning, regardless of whether formal study has recently been undertaken. The study also highlights that learning at work and in the community are highly valued in community contexts, and that the learning at home is valued in a variety of contexts.

The findings of our study complement those of Golding, Marginson and Pascoe (1996, Table 9, 87). They investigated valued prior learning contexts for people with formal post-school qualifications from both TAFE and university sectors, and who were moving in either direction between those sectors. They concluded that work contributes most to the development of most key competencies. Work particularly contributes to the competencies associated with learning from experience (professional judgement), working in teams, solving problems and lifelong learning (learning on demand). Further, their study showed that while formal learning (in either sector) is also important for acquisition of skills associated with analysis of information, understanding systems and expressing

ideas, that the home & other sources (presumably including community) are most important for skills associated with reflection, imagination and cultural understandings. Of all the key competencies, school was found to contribute most to mathematical skills.

The current study has several important implications. The first is for learners and communities in regional Australia with limited access to formal VET, for whom for informal and nonformal community and workplace learning are likely to be critical. The second implication is for community members who are either not working, not working in groups or not currently members of community organisations. Such people are in effect divorced from the opportunity to participate in the most valued forms of learning.

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